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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000697

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [KJUS](#) [MASS](#) [IR](#) [AR](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: AOUN WILL GO TO DOHA; INSISTS ON
NATIONAL UNITY GOVERNMENT

REF: BEIRUT 618

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Classified By: CDA Michele J. Sison for reasons section
1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Free Patriotic Movement leader General Michel Aoun confirmed he will attend the May 16 National Dialogue meeting in Doha, although he expressed his discontent with having all 14 political leaders attend the Dialogue. Aoun argued that a national unity government would restore calm to the country. He himself is angling for his party to receive either the Ministry of Finance or Interior in the next cabinet. Aoun criticized the performance of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) over the past week. He cited the government's revocation of the two controversial decisions taken against Hizballah and the majority's agreement to participate in the National Dialogue as the keys to Hizballah's decision to remove its forces from Beirut. End summary.

WILL ATTEND DOHA

2. (C) Charge Sison, accompanied by A/DCM and DATT, met with Free Patriotic Movement leader General Michel Aoun at his office in Rabieh on May 15. Aoun confirmed that he would attend the National Dialogue meeting beginning May 16 in Doha, although he expressed unspecified concerns with the draft Arab League communique. Absence is never justified, he stated. Aoun further said that he did not like the formula of the Dialogue (involving the 14 top political leaders -- the same formula used in the 2006 Dialogue), elaborating that he believed the number should either be increased or decreased. He complained that Christian leaders such as Phalange leader Amine Gemayel, Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea and Boutros Harb had little representation in parliament, and there should not be a majority of insignificant leaders present with only a few powerful opposition leaders. All the participants should have equal political weight, he argued. Nasrallah would not go to Doha, though he probably would send a representative, Aoun said. He was unsure whether Speaker Nabih Berri would attend,

though Berri's advisor later confirmed that Berri was going.

13. (C) Qatari Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim (HbJ) will head the talks, Aoun said, and the other Arab foreign ministers from the Arab League delegation also would participate. However, he was uncertain whether HbJ would succeed. It's not enough to say that we agree on electing Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander General Michel Sleiman as the consensus president; we have to agree on a national unity government. It's the only insurance we have to calm the situation down, he argued, citing what he perceived as an increasing threat of Sunni extremists in Lebanon. Aoun insisted on either the Ministry of Finance or Interior for the Free Patriotic Movement, explaining that his interest in the latter was its role in the municipalities, the Internal Security Forces (ISF), and parliamentary elections. (Comment: He also said that his Ministry of Finance interest was based on his strong views on anti-corruption, although control of the GOL budget and coffers is of course the more likely explanation. End comment.)

CRITICAL OF LAF'S PERFORMANCE

14. (C) Asked to comment on the LAF's performance over the past week, Aoun quipped that the best fireman is the one who prevents fires. He recalled that he had sent a letter to UN SYG Ban Ki Moon in March 2007 outlying four dangers facing Lebanon that could lead to civil war. The expansion of terrorist organizations in Lebanon was at the top of the list, followed by the rearming of old militias and creation of new ones, corruption (his eternal theme), and Palestinian

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settlement in Lebanon. Acknowledging the difficulties involved in having an army compromised of numerous religious affiliations, Aoun said that his orders when he was LAF Commander were to use "aggression against aggressors" within Lebanon and against any foreign attackers to protect Lebanon.

His instructions were for the officers on the ground to take the initiative, rather than act in a passive, neutral manner.

Orders are then clear, and army unity is not a problem, he said. Citing the January 27 clashes in which the LAF fired upon civilians, Aoun said the investigation of the incident had not produced satisfying results, resulting in low army morale.

15. (C) Aoun reported that Hizballah had made two demands before withdrawing its militants from Beirut: 1) that the government rescind its decisions to transfer the head of airport security and to declare Hizballah's communications network illegal (Reftel); and 2) that the majority accepted the National Dialogue. The next steps would be to open the airport and airport road. (Note: At approximately 1930 the same evening, the first Middle East Airline plane landed in Beirut from Cyprus. End note.) Aoun dismissed reports that Hizballah had mutilated Druze in the Chouf. Hizballah would never do that, he said; even when they took prisoners in the north they turned them over to the LAF which then returned them to their homes.

COMMENT

16. (C) Aoun's blatant criticism of the LAF comes as no surprise, given that Sleiman is the biggest threat not only to any hopes Aoun has left of becoming president, but also to his claim to leadership of the majority of Lebanon's Christians. Likewise, his interest in the Ministry of the Interior probably is rooted in his continuing bitterness over the 2005 parliamentary elections, in which to date he still contests 11 seats. We continue to hear from many sources that Aoun still harbors hopes for the presidency and will do what he can to prevent the success of the National Dialogue;

indeed, the issuance of the Arab League's communique (faxed to NEA/ELA) was delayed several times throughout the course of the afternoon, with Aoun cited at least once as the cause.

End comment.

SISON